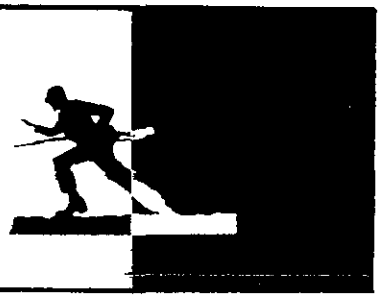
PROFESSIONAL NOTES



Brute Strength, Not Finesse

LIEUTENANT GENERAL WILLIAM R. DESOBRY, United States Army Retired

In considering military operations on urban terrain (MOUT), I can't help coming to a personal conclusion that our doctrine and subsequent manuals tell us what to do but tell us very little of the how to do it. On the basis of my experience in World War II, I would like to describe the "how to do it."

In reality, I have little if any quarrel with the doctrine I have seen recently, but like a lot of our writings, the procedures seem to call for finesse when brute strength is more appropriate.

Ever since my early days, we have always said that tanks are handicapped in town, village, or city fighting—all true. But this doesn't mean that they can't be or shouldn't be used. It is certainly true that they are vulnerable if they are not used with proper care and discretion. I would only point out that the foot soldier is also quite vulnerable—who or what isn't? The real problem is that many interpret the doctrine as saying, "Don't use tanks in village or town fighting—this is a job for the foot soldier going from house to house, preferably over the roof tops." This is great theory but lousy practice. Let me try to explain.

Looking back on my experience, there were essentially two types of village fighting—one where we were on the move in battalion task force configuration advancing 10 to 15 miles per day, and the other where we were confronting a fixed enemy and were attacking to create breakthrough and war of movement conditions. In the first condition, speed of action was called for, while in the second it was more of a deliberate action. The villages or towns I am talking about are the typical small towns or villages prevalent in France, Belgium, and Germany.

APPROACH

We would approach these villages moving down a road in attack formation. In practice we were terribly road-bound, so we normally moved on roads until shot off, then maneuvered and fought through fields and meadows. When we reached a point about 1,000 to 1,200 meters from the front edge of a village, we would usually come under long range fires. At times, however, a village would be quiet but we could sense it was occupied and defended because there was no sign of people moving about, and it normally was barricaded.

At this time the point would deploy and throw in some long range tank main gun fires at the top story windows and the church steeple to suppress or knock out observation and observed direct fires. Hopefully, white flags would show and the defenders—if any—would depart, sending out civilians to say there were no enemy troops left in town. But this did not happen frequently, so let's assume we had to fight to take the town.

The task force commander—along with the advanced guard commander, the main body commander, and the artillery liaison officer—would move up to the point position. The situation was reviewed from an observation post, and a scheme of maneuver plus fire support plan was devised. A typical scheme of maneuver is shown in Figure 1.

The point—now joined by battalion 81mm mortars plus assault guns and tank destroyers (TDs)—would lay down direct fire all along the forward houses in the village, concentrating on possible observation points. The mortars would lay down smoke and fire white phosphorus (WP) rounds into the village, particularly to start roof fires. The supporting artillery unit would also fire into the village.

Under this preparatory fire, the enveloping force heavy in armored infantry plus some tanks—say a rifle company plus a platoon of tanks—would move to the selected flank. Hopefully, the armored infantry could move close to the village in their half-tracks before dismounting, but this was seldom possible as the half-tracks were essentially road bound. The tanks and the armored infantry would then move together under cover of the artillery and mortar fires. The tanks would provide close-in supporting fires. The infantry would move into the first row of buildings and would

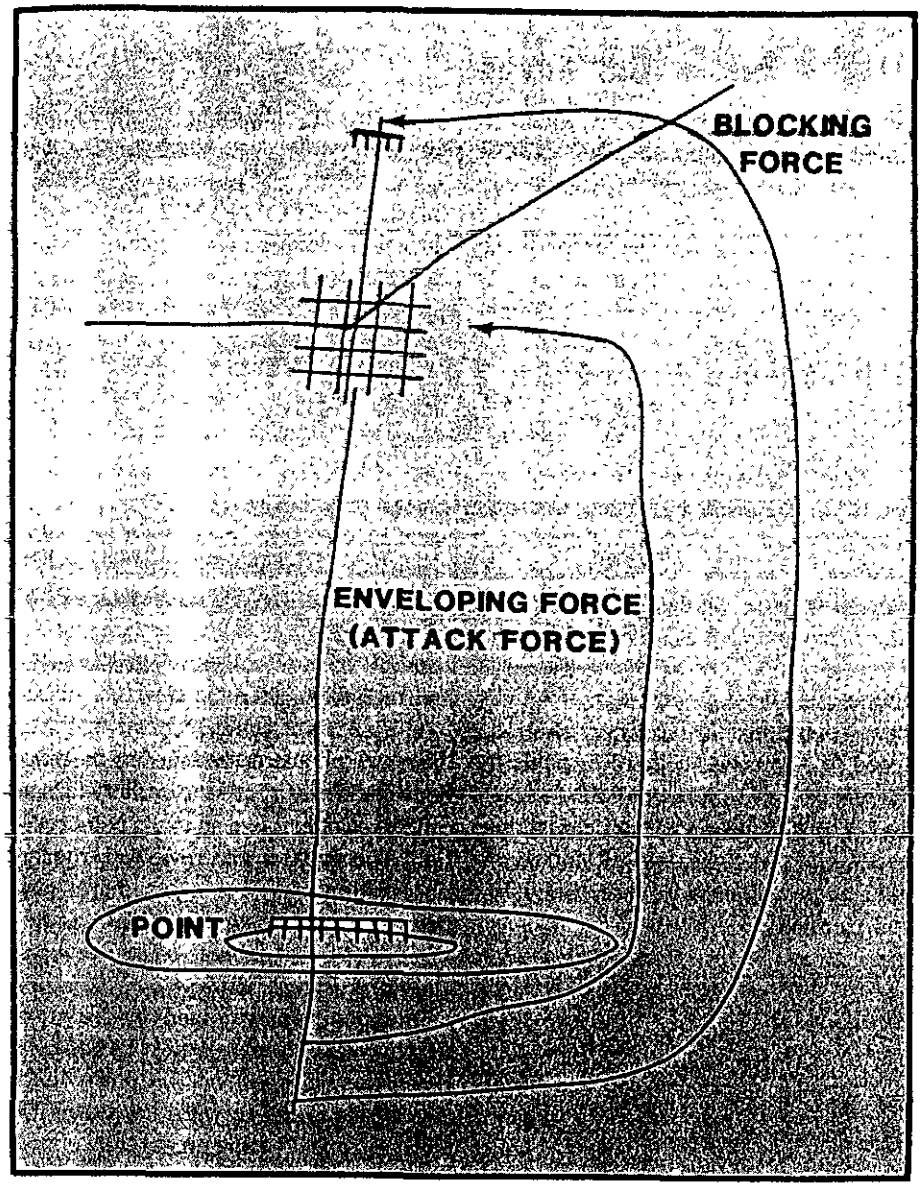


Figure 1

mark their seizure with signal flags or engineer tape. If the buildings were close enough together our men would try to go from roof to roof and fight down as prescribed in the present doctrine. This was seldom possible in village fighting, though, and shouldn't be counted on. Once the buildings in the first row were occupied, the infantry guided the tanks into the village to covered fire positions.

In the meantime, a small blocking force moved around the village to block off the rear—usually a platoon of tanks plus a platoon of armored infantry. If this succeeded, and it didn't always, this served to cut off enemy reinforcements, resupply, and medical evacuation. It was also quite an inhibiting factor because it often caused the enemy to bug out or quit. If this blocking force couldn't make it, it joined and became part of the enveloping force.

Now the tough job of clearing out the other houses started. This was done by having the tanks fire at any occupied houses through their windows and walls—AP followed by HE. The infantrymen went through windows or doors—throwing grenades, then moving in firing their weapons, and using bazookas whenever they had them. The scheme was to shoot or burn the enemy out of the upper floors and drive him out of the house or into the basement where he couldn't see and couldn't fight; then he could be flushed out with grenades and bazooka fire.

We relied on firepower wherever possible. For example, if we could drive a tank up to a window and poke the main gun through the window and fire the gun inside the house, we did so. What I am trying to portray here is that we learned to bash our way through a village. There was little finesse involved. Tanks were guided from place to place by the armored infantry soldiers with the tank commanders going on foot to their new positions, then returning to their tanks to move them up. Tank firing positions were carefully selected to preclude ambush and minimize losses.

Once control of the front edge of the village was gained, the point moved up to help out the attacking forces. If there were barricades (such as logs or wrecked vehicles), they were shot out—not removed by hand. Minefields discovered—such as at the village entrance on the main road—were marked and initially bypassed.

Once we had control of a good part of the village, civilians inevitably started to appear. They were a great help in pointing out which houses were occupied and which weren't, and which houses were booby trapped and where minefields were located. Someone such as the mayor, a policeman, or a fireman was best at pointing out all this. What I am saying is there is a tendency on our part to ignore civilians or not to use them. By all means, use them; even if they are enemy civilians they will often talk without much pressure.

When the village was under control—but not necessarily cleared out—we got back on the move. The commander started to gather in his force, turned over the final clearing to his executive officer (XO), organized his force using the blocking force (if it was still available) as the new point, and got going. The XO, with essentially a rear guard, could finish clearing out the town (there were always hidden enemy stragglers and it took time to locate them).

In the second condition—fighting from fixed positions—the tactics were quite the same, only now it was much more deliberate, especially in the start phase. We employed heavy artillery concentrations of HE and WP and more than one artillery battalion time on target (TOT) if available. Once again, we tried to get around to the rear or flank. It was im-

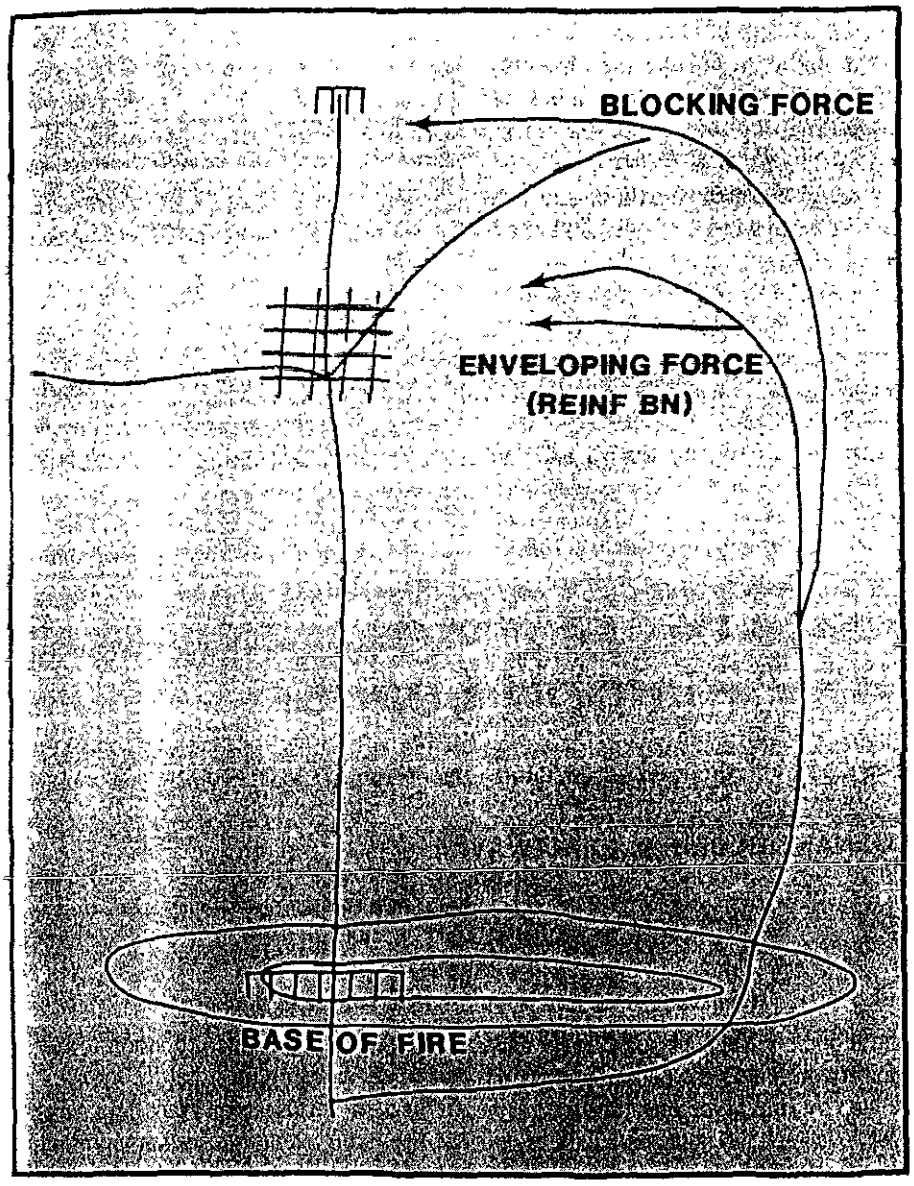


Figure 2

portant for the enveloping force to go deep, because it had a tendency to get sucked in by enemy fire into a shallow envelopment and thus another frontal attack.

I can still recall that, when I was a prisoner of the Germans, many of the new U.S. prisoner officers said they had been captured during an attack on a village. Almost without exception, their stories were that their battalion got the job of attacking a village—the battalion gave the job to a rifle company—the company attacked and gained a foothold into the village—the Germans let them into the first row of houses—cut them off—closed off reinforcements—they fought until out of ammunition and with no support, lots of dead and wounded, had to surrender. The lesson here is that the smallest unit given the mission of taking a heavily defended village should be a reinforced battalion. Then it should attack in full force with complete fire support—never piecemeal. This requires careful planning and the deliberate use of all the available force, then rapid and violent execution.

Figure 2 shows a typical maneuver. The base of fire should be just that—tanks plus mortars. If you can talk the artillery into bringing up an advanced guard battery of SP 155s or even better, SP 8-inch howitzers, to lay down direct fire support, you have a real winner. (Our favorite for this job was the 155 SP gun.) The enemy will have some nasty surprises. For example, the Germans would try to catch our enveloping force out in the open and pin it down with machinegun and small arms fire right at the places where they had registered in mortar and artillery fires. The lesson in this is to move through this fire as quickly as possible—don't get pinned down, because it's the mortar and artillery fires that will cause the casualties and break up the attack. In street fighting, the Germans would sight two or more machineguns down a street. One machinegun, with all tracers, would fire high, the other machinegun, with no tracers, would fire low. Our men would try to crawl under the tracer fire to get across the street but would get hit by the lower sighted gun.

In both types of village fighting, I would be very reluctant to use the Bradleys up front. I would use the tanks up there, along with the infantry, and would use the Bradleys to cover the village high points, flanks, and rear with their guns and machineguns. I would also use the Bradleys for medical evacuation and resupply.

Don't let the tanks get into the town without close-in infantry support. The infantrymen, in addition to entering and taking houses, cover the tanks and keep the enemy from moving from place to place and attacking the tanks with grenades and antiarmor weapons. For example, in one of our actions, the Germans got several tanks into a village we occupied but without infantry support. This allowed us to move around behind the German tanks and knock them out with bazookas and our own tanks and TDs; not one of the German tanks that got into the village survived. Most of our close-in tank fighting was done with our infantry NCOs and officers, on foot, guiding tank commanders and TD commanders to firing positions. Then the latter would return to their vehicles and brief their crews, then move up into the pre-selected positions, fire, and move back to cover. The tanks were exposed as briefly as possible—they completed their fire mission and then moved to cover.

I never did any big city fighting so I cannot comment much on that. But one of the best examples is Aachen. As I recall, it was the 1st Infantry Division that took that city. The fighting there degenerated into a brawl; there was little finesse. For example, I recall that men

from the division located a streetcar barn, loaded a number of the streetcars with TNT, rolled them on their tracks down hill, and exploded them in the German positions. Excellent research material on street fighting can also be found in the many accounts of the British at Arnhem. Charles Macdonald's book *A Time for Trumpets* has several excellent and factual accounts of village fighting.

In sum, present MOUT doctrine isn't all that bad except that it seems to lead to finesse and the exclusion of some kinds of firepower such as tanks and artillery. I am a firm believer in banging away with everything at hand, and the closer the range the better. I know that tanks can be used right up front and at the cutting edge if the proper techniques are used. In a really stubborn situation, add helicopter gunships and TAC air. Don't hesitate to use every available weapon system. I also know from experience that the more violence you throw at the enemy the better your chances of winning and winning quickly, which in turn will save casualties.

Therefore, I suggest that in our doctrine we try to get in more of the how to do it, which is even more important than the what to do and what not to do.

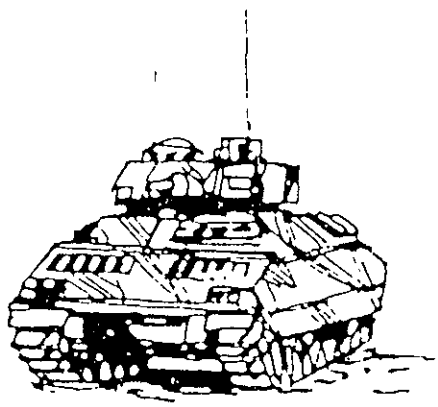
Lieutenant General William R. Desobry, United States Army Retired, commanded both the 54th and the 20th Armored Infantry Battalions in the 10th Armored Division in Europe during World War II. Following the war, his key assignments included command of a combat command in the 2nd Armored Division, service as Deputy and then Senior Advisor to the ARVN IV Corps in South Vietnam, command of the 1st Armored Division, command of the Armor Center and School; president of the XM1 tank task force, and command of the V Corps in Europe. He also served on the Department of the Army Staff and on the faculties of the Command and General Staff College and the Army War College.

A Battle Book
For the BFV Platoon Leader

LIEUTENANT ROBERT L. DUNAWAY

Located in a wadi on The Shelf at the NTC is a Bradley Fighting Vehicle platoon preparing for a mission. After four days of "force on force," the platoon has been tasked to lead its company on a movement to contact through OP1 and OP2 and on to the vicinity of the Whale Gap. Pretty simple, except that the platoon leader has gone without sleep for 48 hours, his platoon has just now been reconstituted, and he has only a few hours until the line of departure (LD) time. This scene is all too familiar today, whether at the NTC, in Europe, or elsewhere.

This platoon's success can hinge on two factors—how well the unit reacts to particular situations and how well organized the platoon's planning process is. With proper battlefield planning, the first factor is merely a matter of drills and SOPs. As for the platoon's plan—because of time limitations, the platoon leader's inexperience, and simple fatigue—it often receives only lip service. It will help a lot if the platoon leader has prepared a "battle book." Such a book clearly and concisely organizes the planning process into step by step guidelines that are easy to use, even at 2300 hours on a dark night before an 0300 LD.



What is a battle book? An SOP or an FM? Yes and no. A battle book is a working notebook that contains quick reference materials, SOPs, blank order formats, and key documents such as sector sketch formats.

But how do you, as a platoon leader, go about developing a battle book?

First, to be useable, your book must be kept simple enough so that anyone in your unit can pick it up and use it, with little training. The more "user friendly" the book is, the more likely it will become a working document, instead of a coaster for your coffee mug.

The actual size of the book depends upon what you find convenient. I prefer to use three-ring binders, as they are inexpensive and allow for pages to be added or removed. All of the paperwork is encased in standard document protectors, which serve to protect the papers and also allow me to write on them with transparency markers. For light infantry leaders, standard size sheets can be reduced for pocket-sized books, but be careful not to reduce your books too much or they will be hard to read, especially by tired eyes.

The system that has been the most successful for me is to divide the book into two binders. One binder contains